

Fist First

White-collar boxing has landed in Asia, taking managers and professionals and putting them into the ring for a modern day Fight Club. And come this November, KL will see 12 expats get into the ring at the Hotel Istana. Did someone say “Adrienne!”?

Words by Sam Coleman
Photos by Johnny McGeorge



It's a strange feeling when you take a man's raging fist to your face. Firstly, there's a sense that your flesh has turned to a strange form of cake dough. It's like you've taken on the elastic properties of a cartoon whereby the blow hits you and your cheek and side of your head folds like an accordion under the impact. But it's the quiver – a strange wave of numbing – that travels down you that makes the whole thing... pleasant. You drift, you float a bit as everything goes into an aquatic slow motion, the air turns to Matisse blue, pastoral blissfulness washes over you. You know that you're falling, that the blow has cut your puppet strings, that you'll soon hit the ground hard. But you couldn't care less: you're fine with everything as you glide. The moment passes and darkness, a sweet and sublime variety, comes on you with appalling certitude.

As happy and embryonic a moment as that has been it's quickly met with an equal amount of rudeness when your eyes open and you're face to toe with the man who just hit you, as you hear a counting going on, as you hear noise from all directions, as you pull the leaden sap of your limbs up and feel the throbbing pain of where the glove-coated fist wrenched your consciousness away. You're a dog on all fours, wanting to vomit; you're a banded kneed bachelor, ready to propose to his teenage sweetheart; you're a semi-erect Neanderthal, eyes gazed into by a scientist from the future. “You okay, you okay?” says the echo chamber, says the scientist in a little



black bowtie. And all the while, as you replicate human evolution in ten seconds, your opponent, the man who did this to you, bounces satisfied, waits to do it again, is gearing up for his next round of pain infliction, to humiliate you in front of your wife, your colleagues, your friends, in fact in front of 500 people dressed in tuxedos and ball dresses. Drool jumps out of your mouth, an opening that has a wad of plastic bunched into it even as it gasps for more air, sweat flows from under the padded head guard that did such a poor job of protecting you in the first place. This is your place of fear, this is your place of flight and there is no time for a decision: you'll either do it or you won't and you'll merely be a witness to what happens. This is Fight Club; you chose this.

And to think, just last month, you could look at the line of managers and professional men and reasonably think they were more content closing M&A deals than landing right hooks. But the world of White Collar Boxing, a new sport that takes its members from business communities around the world, is one that is anything but what it appears. "Look, what we do is we give guys, ones who are a little bit older, maybe who haven't kept up on their fitness, ones who don't really know the sport but are curious to find out about



it, is a chance to see what boxing really is," explains Ian Mullane, founder and CEO of Vanda Productions, the main promoter of White Collar Boxing in Asia. "They get to experience the values of boxing: pride, courage and sportsmanship. I'm living proof of what I'm talking about," says the 38 year-old Brit, referring to his forays as a white-collar boxer himself. Like many who come to the sport, Ian was recruited through friends into taking up the training schedule – one that lasts almost three months – and then entering into the ring for a black tie charity event. "You're shit scared when you get there, no doubt about it," he narrates, "but once you do it you're hooked." For Mullane that translated into leaving his cushy COO job and starting a boxing training facility in the heart of Singapore where more and more boxers – blokes like himself looking to train, searching for a contact sport that had an element of personal challenge – frequented. "I was still the COO of SunGard when I



formed Vanda Boxing Club and I found it totally addictive to live the journey of taking novices through training to competition. Coaching, plus having a flair for putting together high-end productions on the night, led me to realise I had found something a lot more fulfilling than software. When I realised that this was also an excellent way to fulfil my charity ambitions (remember it was raising 50,000GBP in 2005 that got me into this sport) I decided this was a business that needed to be given full time attention so Vanda Promotions was formed, the staff were hired and we have never looked back with 6 events in our first year and 17 in 2008." It didn't take long for Mullane to sign-up for staging bouts through the recently formed World White Collar Boxing Association (WWCBA). Before long he was staging fights throughout SE Asia: 2009 alone will see events in Singapore (x2), Hong Kong (x2), Bangkok, Shanghai, Tokyo, Jakarta, Cape Town, Sydney (x2), Melbourne (x2), Dubai. And now Malaysia. "We see a big growth market [for this sport]; it's going to be big," Mullane grins knowing he's onto a winning thing.

SHOW ME WHAT YOU GOT

Still, reasonable people can ponder what kind of educated, successful people (don't forget, women are more and more coming into white-collar boxing) would place themselves in the ring to get their heads bashed in. Macho Masters of the Universes? Hooligans in Brooks Brothers? Hardly: the truth is they span the range of temperaments and fitness as any office. While decidedly more fit than most, a visit to a white-collar boxing training session would yield a surprise or two.

Take the case of Scott Watters, a Scot business consultant



Andy "Jailbird" Johnston



Anthony "Hooligan" Houlahan



Jonathan "The Wolfman" Alexander



Coach, Hisham Hasham



Gavin "Loony" O'Lunaigh



Matthew "Balboa" Baker



who's toured the globe as an expatriate along with his young family, 41, heavier set, you'd almost say gangly. He smiles quickly and is the epitome of an organised man, Bluetooth devices at the ready to solve a problem from Gulf state clients. And though a rugby man from youth, he got into white-collar boxing this year, overcoming some initial trepidation. "I'd heard about white-collar boxing in Dubai," he describes between punching bag routines, "and when I got wind that it was happening here in KL from the rugby club I thought what the heck. It was an intimidating thought; I'm not aggressive at all. But I thought it would be a lot of fun, there really aren't that many chances to get involved as you get older in these types of things. And the charity," he adds with a flourish. He admits that while he's been in some scraps as a barman in uni, he's never been in a real brawl. That all changed as he got into the ring with Matt Baker, a boxer with similar reach. "There's a bit of fear, I won't deny it but you know that it's controlled, you know that someone's not going to beat you within an inch of your life. That makes a big difference. But frightening, definitely!" he says with a healthy laugh.

As it stands, 64 white-collar boxers have made it to fight night, into the ring on one of the most unforgettable nights of their lives. But the waiting list is growing by the day with 131 potential boxers ready to put the gloves on and see if they have what it takes. "It's not for everyone: there was one guy who literally cried every time he came out of sparring, it was just killing him to have to summon up that aggression. But you know what? That guy got the main event, he got in that ring and he fought his heart out. He got the main fighter of the night vote," Mullane tells. And for those that have visions of bare-knuckle blood fests, white-collar boxing is very much about safety. "That to me is the most important thing, absolutely," says the coach of the white-collar boxing team here in KL, Hisham Basri, Malaysian Olympic trainer and former Commonwealth Games athlete. "It's about the technique (Basri uses Cuban training methods),

not knocking the guy out," Basri states matter-of-factly. And while Mullane testifies that he's only seen a few broken noses in the 100+ boxing matches he's witnessed thanks to white-collar's use of 16 ounce gloves and headgear ("we have jobs the next day after all"), he does admit that in New York state, white-collar boxing has been banned. Take out? It's a safe sport, without a question, but that doesn't mean there aren't risks. The first 'in the ring' sparring of the KL 12 left a black eye, a sore jaw and dizziness in one fighter the day after. Day jobs yes, but explanations might be necessary at coffee breaks.

The most painful part of boxing, however, is not the one inflicted by the punches. It's the brutal training regime that has left fit men puking in its onslaught. Sprints, bag work, core strength routines and the boxing itself are almost unimaginable to the layman. For three months, after putting in full days in the office, the boxers come to a training centre, one that's seen better days, on the outskirts of the city for a few hours of such training. "I tell you," says Matthew Baker, one of the boxers, "I'm a fit guy, I do sports but this is bloody hard," with Gavin O'Luanagh nodding in agreement as we all come to a stop after sprints. And me, with my great luck, am the most un-sportive, computer slouching (and yes, oldest) guy of the lot. I fear for myself wondering if at some point – in utter exhaustion – I'll throw up my hands in the ring and just take the knock-out punch to the face to end it in style rather than puff away in my corner,

too knackered to go on. Still, looking over at the guy doubled over vomiting from the intensity of the work-out, maybe I'm not so bad off, maybe, come time for the fight, I'll rise to the challenge.

TRAIN, DON'T COMPLAIN

We don't get too much time for introspection, for inner-doubt. We're Spartans, we run through the paces, we face the intensity of the training schedules, the sparring and the thought that in less than a month we're in the ring, surrounded by a black-collar crowd, many of them our friends, family, co-workers and business relations. It's a daunting thought but we try not to dwell on it all. Coach Basri, ever the Zen master with his shaved head, his grey goatee reminding one of a tough, full-sized Yoda, says it best. "I try to instill the basics of boxing: pride, courage and pushing yourself to the limit, finding out who you are." I'm panting, feeling brutalised from the physical taxation of the training, of the boxing – both being hit and hitting – and I wonder how my fight will turn out on November 28th. But I realise that Basri's right. Every boxer, white-collar, pro or otherwise knows the axiom innately: the opponent isn't the man your fighting against in the ring, it's the man inside you, the one that you'll only find out when you place yourself in that moment of truth.

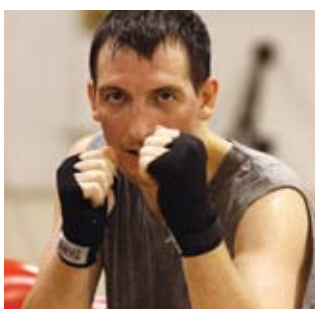
The Montpelier Group White Collar Boxing™ Charity Fight Night, Hotel Istana, Nov 28, +65 6292 3864, www.vandapromotions.com, ivy@vandapromotions.com ■



"There's only" Juan Jose Abnero



Tom "The Sarge" Sarginson



"Hot Shot" Scott Watt



Sam "Cyclone" Coleman



Tai Ru "Rage" Rupert



"Frightening" Faufelosdo Caretta